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The Predynastic Dancing Egyptian Figurine

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Abstract

In 1962, Peter Ucko wrote his landmark work, *The Interpretation of Prehistoric Anthropomorphic Figurines*, challenging and permanently changing the prevailing view of prehistoric figurines as representations of a universal great mother goddess. His work focused on the Predynastic figurines of Egypt, and concluded that there was nothing divine about them. They were probably dolls, ancestor figures, talismanic pregnancy aids, tools for sex instruction and puberty rites, twin substitutes in graves and concubine grave figurines. Since then, this group of figurines has received minimal attention. Using Ucko's four-stage methodology, this study more closely examines these figurines in the context of Ancient Egyptian culture and religion, with specific attention to the contemporary Sudanese religious beliefs and practices, which may share roots with Predynastic Egyptian culture. This study concludes that some Dynastic religious beliefs and iconography relating to female deities can be recognised in many of these figurines, and can be traced back to prehistoric Nilotic rituals.

Keywords

figurines, predynastic Egypt, Sudanese religion, prehistoric religion, neolithic, ancient Egypt

General Background

While Ancient Egypt is famous for its art, the large corpus of over 200 prehistoric sculptures, dated between 4000 and 3000 BCE, has been largely overlooked. Unlike their popular Dynastic successors, they are known only from one or two examples appearing in brief accounts of the Predynastic origins of Ancient Egypt. These sculptures are small anthropomorphic and therianthrope figurines, predominantly female, found in a few of the thousands of Predynastic graves excavated in Upper Egypt, with only two figurines found in Lower Egypt (Ucko 1968:167).

Early in the development of Egyptology and archaeology, these and other prehistoric figurines were assumed to represent deities, possibly a single supreme female deity worshipped throughout the prehistoric world. With the

advancement of archaeological theory and techniques, Egyptologists, as well as archaeologists and prehistorians working on other cultures, abandoned this interpretation as simplistic and lacking evidence, with the exception of a group of feminists who revived the Mother Goddess theory, reinvesting female prehistoric figurines with divine status (Eisler 1990; Gimbutas 1989; Stone 1976). The fields of anthropology, archaeology and Egyptology remain unconvinced.

In 1983, prominent Egyptologist, Eric Hornung, dismissed any discussion of the divinity of the Predynastic figurines (Hornung 1983, 102–103). He based his conclusion on the work of Peter Ucko (1962; 1968), the archaeologist most influential in divesting prehistoric figurines of their divinity. Hornung's discussion was so brief, that he excluded any description of the figurines, ignoring their diversity of style and physical attributes. His brevity overlooks the complex interaction of symbolic elements present in some of these figurines. This paper seeks to tease out these symbols and explore their importance for Predynastic and Dynastic Egyptians. First, the general background of the issue is outlined, providing an over-all description of the Predynastic figurine complement and describing the methodology to be employed. Second, the main body of the discussion concentrates specifically on one particular Predynastic figurine, often called the 'dancing' figurine.

Peter Ucko's Interpretation

The Egyptian figurine complement has fortunately been catalogued in detail by Peter Ucko (1968), who identified 232 genuine Predynastic figurines, and provided illustrations of the main types. Overlooked and more recent finds bring the current total to 244.¹

Of the 244 figurines securely identified as Predynastic, 154 are assigned specific geographic locations: 88 to specific graves, 63 to specific cemeteries, and the 'miserable fragments' (Ucko 1968, 167) of 3 figurines to habitation sites. The remaining 90 were simply 'found in a grave', hence no reference to specific graves or cemeteries. Two of the three from habitation sites come from Lower Egypt (Ucko 1968, 167), suggesting that the figurines were part of wide-spread mortuary practice in Upper Egypt.² Most are female and, despite being categorised as anthropomorphic, many have theriomorphic attributes, usually in the form of animal or bird-like heads. Most are made from baked clay, but many are made from vegetable paste, some from ivory, and a few from stone. Some are molded from unfired clay, but these tend to be badly preserved, nearly turning to dust over the centuries, and the friability of this material makes it impossible to determine its prevalence.

Ucko's criteria for assessing the divinity of the figurines derived from his opinion that representations of divinities should: (1) look like divinities, that

is, have headdresses or other distinguishing features; (2) be found in a 'sacred' location, that is, a temple, shrine or grave; and (3) be made of precious materials, more appropriate to divine imagery than is cheap clay (Ucko 1962, 38).

Hornung's assessment drew directly from Peter Ucko's conclusion that the prehistoric figurines of the Near East and Egypt neither represented a supreme, Universal Mother Goddess, nor any other divinities. Based on their appearance and findspots, he could find nothing divine about them (Ucko 1962, 43). Using ethnographic parallels, largely from African pre-industrial societies, he classified them as dolls, ancestor figures, talismanic pregnancy aids, tools for sex instruction and puberty rites, twin substitutes in graves and concubine grave figurines (Ucko 1962, 45–48; 1968, 420–443; 1969).

Since Hornung's assessment, little has been said about the Predynastic figurines with the exception of analysis by Fekri Hassan (1992; 1998), working with the research by Shelley Smith (1984). Smith compared the physical attributes of the male to the female figurines, and came to some conclusions about the gender implications of the differences she observed. Extrapolating from Smith's conclusions, Hassan used similar data to trace the use of female imagery, gender and myth in the rise of Egyptian state power and the divinity of the king. Later, Hassan and Smith (2002) used grave goods and figurine imagery to posit the role of women as 'agents of transformation and birth' (Hassan and Smith 2002, 63). In addition, in his revised edition of *The Egyptians*, Cyril Aldred interpreted the dancing pose of these figurines as a mimic of the mating dance of birds (Aldred 1998 [1961], 74, Fig. 37). Garfinkel linked the figurines to Nagada 1³ pot paintings of women, whom he concluded were leading their sons through an initiation dance (Garfinkel 2001).

The attempt to generalise about prehistoric figurines has long since subsided, and their wide diversity of use and cultural specificity are now accepted (Bailey 2005, 197–199). Contemporary examples from South Asia (India) demonstrate that small, roughly-made clay and cow dung figurines can and do represent various deities. They are most frequently female, are made by South Asian villagers in their home rituals, and are often ritually discarded after use (Entwistle 1984; Minturn 1993, 191; Pearson 1996, 86, 157), undermining Ucko's generalisations. The archaeological record of South Asia demonstrates a nearly unbroken figurine-using tradition from the pre-Indus Valley Neolithic cultures (Banerji 1994; Chamberlain 2002), indicating the possible worship of one or more goddesses similar to those worshipped in South Asia today.

The Predynastic Egyptian figurines seem to have been designed specifically for mortuary use, thus perhaps narrowing the range of possible meanings.⁴ The nearly complete absence of figurines from settlement sites suggests that the figurines were not used as dolls, initiation figures, ancestor figures, votary objects for domestic and village rituals or for any other domestic

purpose that could leave traces of figurine use behind. Broken, discarded or forgotten figurines were not found in homes, streets or rubbish tips, as they were in other Near Eastern prehistoric sites. With very few exceptions, all Predynastic figurines ended up in graves, as though they were made specifically for mortuary purposes and were not simply retired to the grave with the death of the owner. They may have been used in village funerary rituals prior to interment, but it seems their final goal was the grave. Hence, I think we are looking at the remains of figurines specific to death rituals and possibly beliefs in the afterlife.

Certainly the Dynastic mortuary cult that followed the Predynastic would support this conclusion, since many grave goods were made specifically to assist the deceased on the afterlife journey and were not personal objects enjoyed and used by the deceased during life. Early in the Dynastic period, the development of tombs complete with storage chambers accommodated the increasing number of objects and provisions thought necessary or desirable in the afterlife (Spencer 1982, 45–73).

Given the rarity of grave figurines in Predynastic Egypt (out of tens of thousands of graves only 244 figurines have survived), it could be assumed that the figurines are special objects, reserved for the use of powerful or wealthy people (Smith 1984). The Predynastic figurines, however, do not seem to have belonged to the mortuary practices of the élite. A close examination of 85 figurines from 47 graves (Ayrton and Loat 1911; Baumgartel 1970a; Brunton 1937; 1948; de Morgan 1912; Maciver and Mace 1902; Payne 1990; Petrie 1901) and detailed in (Relke 2001, 104–158) indicates that the figurines did not necessarily accompany privileged people.

In assessing the wealth of any given Predynastic grave, the number of objects per grave is used as a determining factor, with ten objects signifying a wealthy grave and over 20 objects a very wealthy grave (Castillos 1982). Most graves containing figurines were poor by these standards, with only ten containing ten to nineteen objects and six containing more than 20 objects, leaving 31 ‘poor’ graves.

Closer examination of the grave goods indicates that, even in the ‘wealthy’ graves, objects and materials reflecting high status in the community do not appear. In her analysis of the graves at Nagada, Katherine Bard determined ranked categories of materials for grave goods, from one to six, with the first category constituting the most rare of materials, either precious or imported, and available only to persons of high status (Bard 1994, 89). Only seven of the 47 graves with figurines contained materials in the first or second categories. The remaining 40 graves, even if ‘wealthy’ by Castillo’s standards, displayed the possessions of a common rather than élite person. The fact that the figurines were used by ordinary rather than wealthy or élite members of the

Predynastic cultures helps explain why they were made primarily from non-precious materials.

Ucko did admit that the presence of major goddesses in the subsequent historical religion could be acceptable evidence. With respect to ancient Mesopotamia alone, he admitted that in the Mother Goddess 'interpretation, moving from historic to prehistoric material, may be important and legitimate' (Ucko 1962, 43). However, he did not apply this provision to Egypt. Although the Dynastic religion teems with important goddesses and he considered graves to be an appropriate 'sacred' location, he still did not consider the Egyptian figurines as candidates for divinity because of the few exceptions found outside the graves (Ucko 1968, 418). This conclusion is odd, particularly since subsequent historic Egyptians continued to place figurines representing divinities in their graves (Baines 1991, 180-181; Frankfurter 1998, 134; Pinch 1993, 199-233). In addition, several deities were especially involved in the complex mortuary beliefs and practices for which Egypt is renowned: Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, Nut, Anubis and Osiris, and logic suggests that these Dynastic deities drew on the mortuary symbolism of the Predynastic period, given that the Dynastic mortuary cult of Ancient Egypt featured several predominant female deities and descended from the strong mortuary practices of Predynastic Egypt.

Using Ucko's four-stage methodology, the following section explores the possible religious meaning of the Predynastic 'dancing' figurines. In brief, this includes: (1) a close examination of the physical attributes of the figurines; (2) the archaeological context, in this case graves and accompanying grave goods; (3) the historic religion that succeeded the Predynastic figurine-using culture and the use of figurines in that historic culture, in this case Dynastic Egypt; and (4) the use of appropriate ethnographic parallels, in this case, the contemporary tribal cultures of Sudan.⁵

The 'Dancing' Figurine

Of the many thousands of figurines excavated from Neolithic sites in Europe, the Middle and Near East and South Asia, the 'dancing' female figurine from Predynastic Egypt may be the most graceful and aesthetically pleasing (Figure 1)⁶ (Ucko 1968, Figurines 72, 73; figs. 47, 48). The arms curve above the head, fingers pointing inward, palms outward; the modeled face forms a large beak, the buttocks protrude, and in some examples the body bends at the hips. The legs, undifferentiated, end in a 'peg', sometimes with upturned toes. These figurines appear to be dancing.

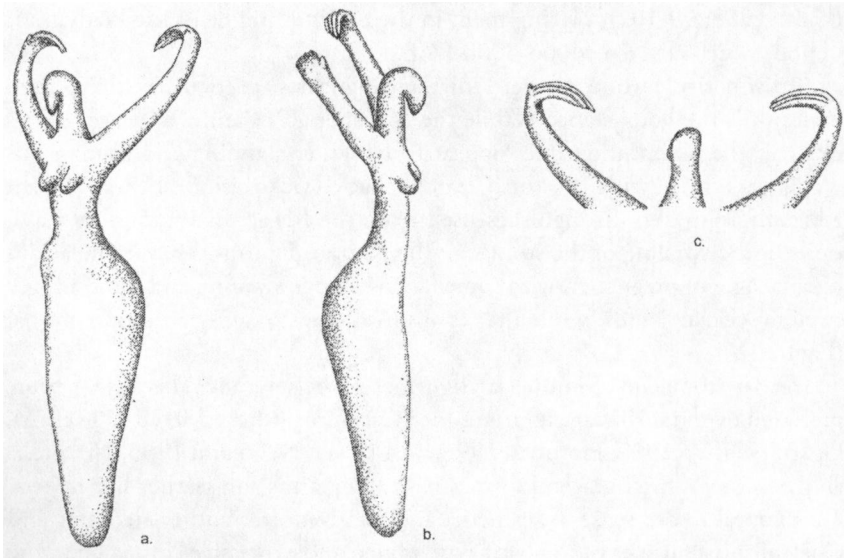


Figure 1. Nagada 1 or 11 clay female figurine from Ma'ameriah.
Height 22.6cm.

Physical Attributes and Archaeological Context

A total of 38 female figurines presenting both raised arms and a beaked face can be identified, with the 'pinched' faces of many others suggesting a beak (Ucko 1968, Figurines 56–69, 72, 73, 106, 112–127, 134, 165, 168, 185, 203, 215, 217). Missing arms from female figurines with beaked faces and missing heads from female figurines with raised arms extend the possible numbers. As well, two beaked male figurines with arms raised at right angles, with the hands beside the head (Ucko and Hodges 1963, 207–208; Pl. 28e) and one beaked male with arms raised over the head (Ucko 1968, Figurine 164) demonstrate that male figurines with similar characteristics constitute a small proportion of the overall group of figurines with raised arms.

The majority of this style of female figurine comes from two caches from separate locations, Ma'ameriah and Khizam. Grave number 186 at Ma'ameriah contained fourteen of this type, and two come from grave number 2 at this site (de Morgan 1912). The Khizam deposit consists of sixteen of this type of figurine found under an earthenware lid, assumed to be part of the contents of a tomb, but since these figurines are in the unstratified, bought category, there is always some uncertainty (Ucko and Hodges 1963, 215–217). Ucko has dated these figurines to the Nagada I period, c3900–3650 BCE

(Ucko 1968, 99-101), placing them in the early to middle of the Predynastic period, which covered c4000-3000 BCE.

A distinctive feature of many of these figurines, particularly those from Khizam, is the body stance. While the Ma'ameriah figurines appear to stand upright, the Khizam figurines appear to be either standing and leaning forward, or sitting, with the torso leaning back (Ucko 1968, 117-122). The Khizam group also distinguishes itself from the Ma'ameriah group by variations in the swelling of the stomach. The Khizam figurines seem to be at different stages of pregnancy, with some having a large swelling and some a slight swelling (Ucko 1968), while the stomachs of the Ma'ameriah group are flat (Figure 1b).

The flat-stomached Ma'ameriah figurines are better known because they are preferred over the Khizam figurines for illustrations (Aldred 1998 [1961], 74, Fig. 37; Hassan 1992; Hoffman 1993, dust jacket; Neumann 1963, 26), probably because of their graceful form, upsweeping arms and feather-like fingers. They appeal to our sense of aesthetics and stand out from other Neolithic and Chalcolithic figurines of the Near East as vital and expressive compared to the often bizarre, unattractive or inaccessible figurines of other contemporaneous cultures, such as the 'lizard-headed' figurines of the 'Ubaid culture of Southern Mesopotamia, the lumpy, potato-like heads of the Yarmukian figurines of the Levant and the stalk-headed figurines of the Mesopotamian Halaf culture.⁷

Grave 2 at Ma'ameriah, which contained two figurines of this type, also included seven other objects, while grave 186 contained sixteen pots as well as sixteen similar figurines. This coincidence may suggest the offerings of sixteen mourners. Goods from these graves were made of common materials and the pots were ordinary, with no distinctive designs, and made from clay rather than stone (de Morgan 1912). By Bard's and Castillos's criteria, discussed above, even these distinctive and carefully crafted figurines did not belong to a person of unusual status or occupation, but were goods from ordinary graves.

Although this style of figurine, combining arms raised above the head with a beaked face, had a limited distribution during a short period in the early Predynastic, the raised arms motif occurs on other figurines styles (Ucko 1968, Figurines 103-105, 130-132, 138, 173) and also throughout the Nagada I and II periods on pot decorations (Baumgartel 1955, 64, Fig. 14; Griffiths 1996; Petrie 1921, Pl. XXV). Prior to the Predynastic period, early Nile dwellers also drew anthropomorphic figures with raised arms on pots and cave walls (Garfinkel 2001; Kendall 2004; Winkler 1938, 24-26 Pl. XXII.1, XIV, XV.2). All have inward turning hands.

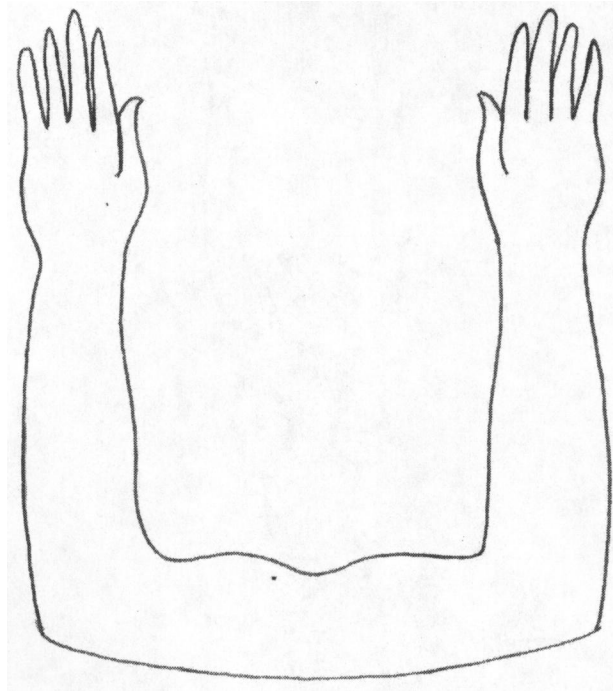


Figure 2. The *Ka* hieroglyph.

The Significance of Raised Arms

To Ucko, raised arms had no particular significance other than stylistic variation (Ucko 1968, 423). The theme of raised arms, however, continued into the Dynastic period in a variety of forms, the most obvious being the raised arms of the *Ka* hieroglyph (Figure 2), signifying the part of the triune Egyptian soul that was the focus of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony in the mortuary cult of the king. The hieroglyph for the life force, the *Ka*, takes the form of a pair of raised arms, bent at the elbows, similar to the position of the raised arms in the male Predynastic figurines.

Other raised arm configurations appear in other examples of Dynastic art, most notably the goddess Nut, painted on the inside of coffin lids, who raises her arms over the deceased body lying beneath her (Figure 3).⁸ Clearly, raised arms must have meant something to the Predynastic and Dynastic Egyptians. The figurines of this style are fragile and difficult to create, suggesting highly significant symbolic meanings.

The raised arms of the Predynastic figurines have sometimes been compared to the raised arm movements in the ox and cow dances of contemporary

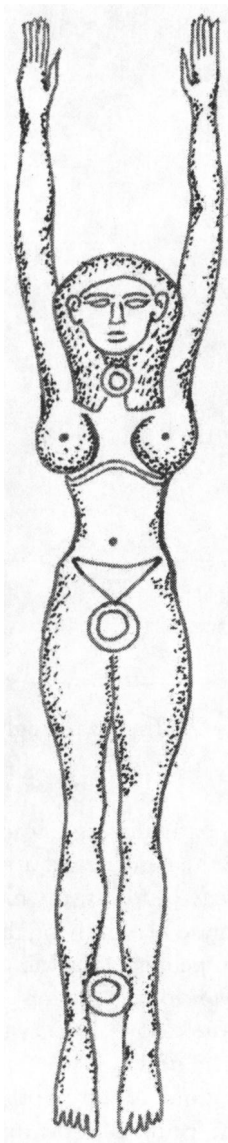


Figure 3. The goddess Nut carved on the schist sarcophagus of Princess Ankhnesneferibre.

Sudanese tribes. In discussing the female figures with raised arms on decorated ware (Figure 4),⁹ Elise Baumgartel observed that contemporary Sudanese women perform a ‘cow dance’. She concluded that these figures on the vases, and by implication, the figurines with raised arms, are ‘dancing as part of a ritual belonging to the cow goddess’, and are a prototype of the most popular of all Dynastic deities, Hathor, the fertility goddess (Baumgartel 1955, 81; 1970b, 493).

Despite Baumgartel’s comparison, so little attention has been given to the relationship between the ‘cow dances’ and the Predynastic imagery, that Egyptologists have rarely acknowledged it.¹⁰ In his analysis of the imagery on the decorated ware, J. Gwyn Griffiths ridicules Baumgartel’s ‘cow dance’ interpretation:

Dr. Baumgartel, who interprets the dance (if it is a dance) as a ‘cow-dance’ ... a phrase which is itself not easy to interpret (does it mean ‘a dance like that of a cow’?) Has any one seen cows dancing?, wants to explain the concentric curved circles of the boat-standards as ‘the horns and arms of the cow-goddess’. This double interpretation seems to impose too great subtlety on a simple design. (Griffiths 1996, 14)

However, the obvious comparisons between Predynastic imagery and the Sudanese ‘cow dances’ led Baumgartel to her conclusions and are not as far-fetched as Griffiths thought. These Sudanese dances are performed by both boys and girls of the Nuer and Dinka tribes. In both of these societies, the ox or bull is the closest earthly symbol of their highest god. In Nuer society the high god, *Kwoth Nhial*, is represented by the majesty of the wide spreading horns of the ox (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 4). Being neither the ox nor the horns, *Kwoth Nhial* is merely suggested by the aesthetic grandeur of the sweep of the horns. The Dinka also hold that the supreme God, *nhialic aciek* and *nhialic wa*, ‘God the creator’ and ‘God (my) father’ respectively, is connected to humanity through cattle, the gifts from god (Lienhardt 1961, 23).

The ox is central to Nuer and Dinka religion and society. In these patriarchal societies, the care of oxen falls to the men, although the women bring the oxen into the family as bridewealth. At initiation, each boy receives an ox-name and his own bull, which is later castrated for ritual reasons. The young initiate devotes much time, attention and emotional expression to his ox. He decorates the horns with tassels, as he did as a child with clay figurines, and performs dances, songs and poems in praise of it. The dance often requires the youth to hold ‘up his arms in imitation of its horns’ (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 250–251).

Through his initiation ox, the Nuer youth enters ‘into a new kind of relationship with God, the guardian spirits of his family and lineage, and the

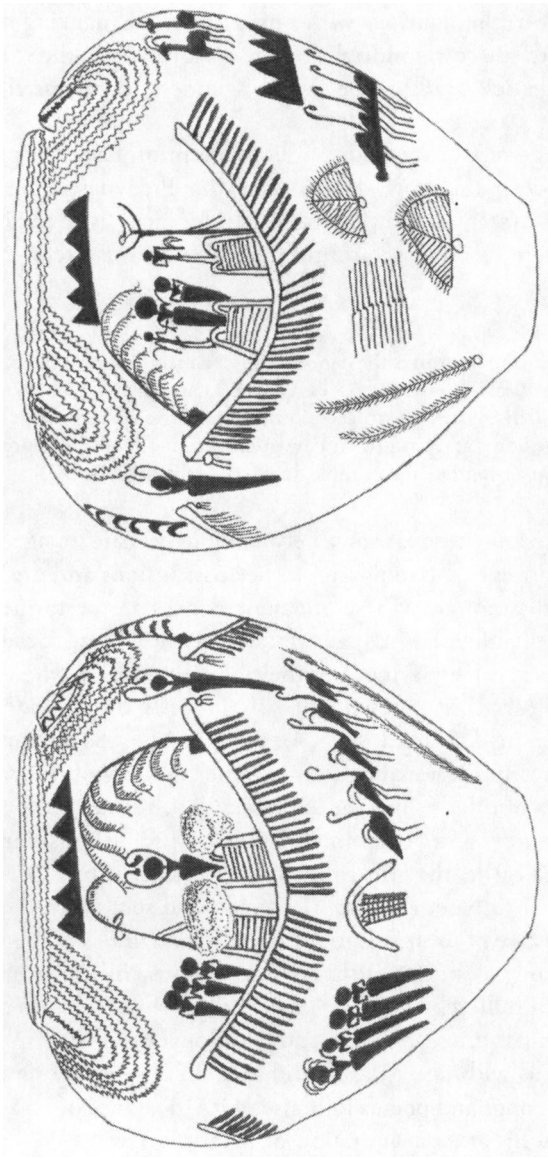


Figure 4. Two views of Nagada 11 Decorated Ware depicting female figures with raised arms, "Horus" falcon and horns boat standard, and triad.

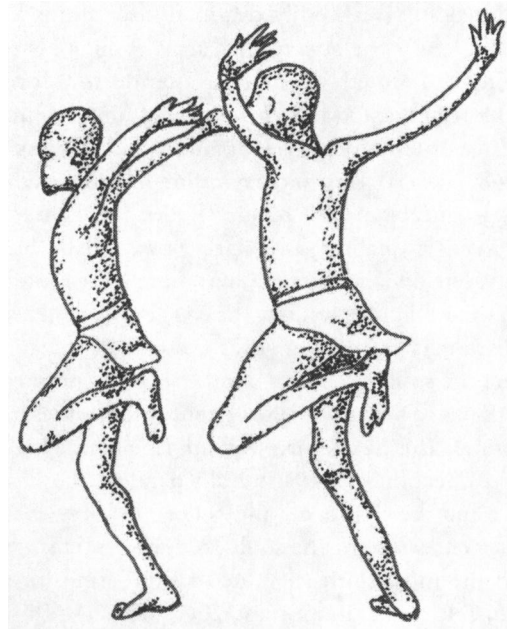


Figure 5. Two Dinka boys dancing the ox-dance.

ghosts of his ancestors' (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 251). The relationship with his initiation ox is so close that, as a boy matures, his identity becomes tied up with this ox, which comes to stand as a symbol for the self, even after it has died or been sacrificed (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 253).

The Dinka cattle also stand in symbolic identification with people, the girls sharing the identification through the cows (Lienhardt 1961, 16–17). The boys raise their arms, palms turned out, in imitation of the spreading horns of the ox, and perform the ox-dance, or *agar*, a simulation of the bulls running with the cows, represented by the village girls (Lienhardt 1961, 16–18). (Figure 5)¹¹

The Dinka men identify themselves directly with their cattle. To attract girls, the Dinka boys decorate their cattle and take their names from the colours and markings of their cattle. Warriors attribute to themselves the characteristics of bulls, and the Dinka basic social group for men is the cattle-camp (Lienhardt 1961, 10–27).

The Ka

The *Ka* is the most obvious example of a meaningful raised-arms motif (Figure 2). It refers to one of three spiritual parts of a human being that the

Egyptians believed survives bodily death. It also means 'embrace' or 'clasp' (Hornblower 1929, 34). The outstretched arms of the *Ka* of the sun-god 'enfold the human being in a protective embrace' after death (Hornung 1992, 175).

Henri Frankfort understood the *Ka* as a 'vital force', which individuals possessed to a greater or lesser degree throughout their lives as well as after death (Frankfort 1948, 61-65). This understanding of the *Ka* compares favourably with the Dinka concept of *wei*, or life (Relke and Ernest 2003, 69-70). In Dinka belief, *wei* is a quality particularly possessed by bulls. The bull, as a figure of vitality, fertility and strength, has more *wei* than a human being, and for the Dinka, their religious leaders, the Masters of the Fishing Spear, possess more *wei* than ordinary men and are thus treated with respect. With their excess *wei*, the Masters can sustain the lives of other people and their cattle. All Dinka people possess *wei*, to a greater or lesser extent, and it varies in intensity over the course of a lifetime. This *wei* departs at death (Lienhardt 1961, 206-207).

The Dinka connection of *wei* and bulls parallels the Egyptian connection between the *Ka* and the vitality of bulls, since the same word, *Ka*, in Egyptian means 'bull' as well as part of the soul. To the Egyptians, the part of the bull that contained the most spiritual value or 'animating force' was the foreleg (Gordon 1996, 34; Relke and Ernest 2003, 70-71). This vitality could be transferred to the gods, priests or the deceased at the time of sacrifice. For the Dinka, the foreleg also constitutes one of the most important parts of the sacrificed bull or ox, and is presented to prominent members of the group during the sacrificial ritual (Lienhardt 1961, 24).

A potent symbol to the Dynastic Egyptians, a bull's foreleg is frequently depicted as the sole offering in the afterlife at the time of judgment, and is linked to the reanimation of the deceased at the Opening of the Mouth ceremony:

The aim of the Opening-of-the-Mouth ceremony was to reanimate the deceased, and the presentation of the foreleg of the bull (*Ka*), the symbol of vitality and virility, to the mouth of the deceased was an intended highlight of that ceremony. (Gordon 1996, 34)

The connection between the vitality of cattle and the survival of the human spirit in the afterlife is implied by the use of the term *Ka* for both the foreleg of a bull and the human spirit and symbolised by the image of raised arms.

The cow and bull were powerful, spiritual symbols to the ancient Egyptians as well as to contemporary Nile dwellers. The Nuer and Dinka elevated the vitality of the bull or ox to divine status, seeing the power and splendour of their highest deity reflected in the graceful upturned sweep of a bull's horns. In Ancient Egypt, transferring the energy of the bull (*Ka*), particularly that contained in the foreleg, to the deceased formed one of the main aims of

Dynastic mortuary ritual. Also, by eating the foreleg of the bull sacrificed during the rituals, the living could strengthen their *Ka* (Gordon 1996, 35). Kendall suggests that the *Ka* concept, linking to the importance and power of the bull as the king, the representative of the divine on earth, may have been expressed as early as Nagada 1, in the petroglyph images with raised arms (Kendall 2004, 126).

Increasingly, the evidence suggests that the raised arm motif signified survival after death to the Predynastic Egyptians and was perhaps an early expression of the concept of the *Ka*, later condensed to a hieroglyph.

The Bird Head/Beak

Therianthropic deities, usually with human heads, are common throughout the ancient world. Creatures that are part human and part animal, bird or reptile appear in the mythologies of South Asia, Mesopotamia and Greece, as well as Egypt. Dynastic Egyptian therianthropic art distinguishes itself with its many animal-headed deities. Ucko's 1968 catalogue demonstrates that, of those Predynastic figurines with intact heads, a large portion have non-human attributes, the most common being the head with a large beak for a face, as characterised by the 'dancing' figurines. The continuation of this style into the Dynastic period suggests that the Predynastic therianthropic figurines also represent divine beings, rather than, as Ucko postulated, dolls, twin substitutes, ancestor figures or initiation figurines.

The Body Stance: Bending Forward or Leaning Backward?

Many of the female figurines with raised arms, and those with arms in other positions, are described as either standing and leaning forward or sitting and leaning backward. No leaning male figurine has been found yet. Whether a figurine looks more natural standing or sitting is sometimes debatable, and Ucko includes both options in his descriptions. When displayed in museums, these figurines are sometimes positioned on a support that attempts to correct the 'problem'.

This unusual position, particularly for those figurines with raised arms, has contributed to the 'dance' interpretation. The arms in conjunction with the tilt of the body and the often upturned feet strongly suggest a ritual dance with precise gestures. Perhaps those figurines that have been understood to be seated and leaning backward are really standing and bending far forward in a gravity-defying dance step.

If, however, we put aside the notion of dance for a moment and do not attempt to place the figurines in either a standing or a seated position, another possibility emerges.

The figurines might not be touching the ground at all, either in a seated or a standing position. Perhaps they are symbolically intended to cover or spread over the body of the deceased. Some of the leaning figurines have turned up toes. In a horizontal position overhead, the toes would point down towards the corpse in a manner that completes the convex curve of the figurine's body, stretching out to envelop the body of the deceased. This position alludes to the Dynastic sky goddess, Nut, whose horizontal body stretches out over the deceased in the coffin. She is found painted on the inside of coffin lids in the Middle Kingdom (Figure 3), where her protective body covers the deceased.

Mortuary Goddesses of Ancient Egypt

Nut

As the mother of the gods in their celestial forms, Nut gives birth each morning to the sun-god and swallows him up at night. Images of Nut depict the various stages of the sun as it moves through her body and out between her legs. As embodiments of the Egyptian gods, the celestial bodies are also swallowed daily by Nut and traverse the length of her body, to be reborn through her vagina (Bleeker 1973, 34).

As the night sky or the Underworld, she hovers over the deceased in the coffin, covering the full length of the body with her outstretched limbs. She raises her arms high over her head, pointing her toes downward, turning herself into a canopy covering the deceased. Opening herself in this way to the dead, she welcomes them into her embrace where she gives them new life in the night sky, as she does the stars and planets every day. Of the deceased king in the coffin, the *Pyramid Texts* (Allen and Der Manuelian 2005)¹² say: 'Your mother Nut has spread herself over you in her name of Shetpet.' (*Pyr.* T 199b).

In the *Pyramid Texts*, Nut is described as the womb that holds the king as the seed of the god (*Pyr.* T 10), and further describes her as the 'burial place', 'burial chamber', and 'tomb's superstructure' (*Pyr.* T 364), as though the sarcophagus, with its illustrations of Nut stretched over the deceased, were her womb. Faulkner translates this to read: 'in her name of "Sarcophagus"' (Faulkner 1969, line 616). The *Pyramid Texts* also characterise Nut as a cow goddess of the sky, who receives the king into the afterlife:

...Nut shall give her arms toward him. She of long horn and dangling breast will suckle this Meryre and not wean him. When she has taken him to the sky she will not drop him to the earth, but will make this Pepi's abode in the fore of the Dual Shrines. (*Pyr.* P 495)

...it is the mother of Pepi, the great wild cow with long plumage, dazzling headcloth, and dangling breasts. She has lifted him to the sky—and does not lower him to the earth... (*Pyr.* P 524)

The pendulous breasts, the long cow horns and the hovering position all describe attributes of the Predynastic figurines. It is not hard to interpret the figurines as a proto-Nut, protecting, nurturing and giving birth to the soul after the death of the body.

*Hathor*¹³

Another cow goddess associated with the afterlife was Hathor, who, like Nut, welcomed the deceased into the afterlife. If the Predynastic figurines can be linked to early representations of Egyptian deities, the favoured one will probably be Hathor. Hathor's iconography and identification with the cow can be traced back through the material record to early Nagada times.¹⁴ Amulets identified as cow's heads with horns have been found in several graves throughout the Nagada period. If the raised arms of the figurines and the images on the decorated ware are understood to mimic the horns of cattle, then Hathor is suggested above all. Her association with bird imagery on the boat standards painted on decorated ware places her alongside Horus, the falcon god, as either his mother or his wife.

Egyptologist, J. Gwyn Griffiths (1996, 11–16) examined the anthropomorphic images on the decorated ware and concluded that the female figure with upraised arms and the larger female figures are goddesses (1996, 13) (Figure 4). Where the figures appear in groups of three on the vases, Griffiths argued in favour of a 'divine triad', in which the 'goddess in the triad is probably an early form of Hathor'. He based his conclusion on the presence of a standard depicting cow horns in conjunction with a falcon. The falcon represents Horus and the cow horns must therefore indicate Hathor, the original mother of Horus. The crook in the left hand of the male in the triad, he pointed out, could indicate the 'eventual insignia of the dynastic Pharaoh and of Osiris' (Griffiths 1996, 15). He further suggested that the leading male figure is the 'Horus chieftain' (1996, 15). While he did not specifically mention the Osirian triad (Osiris as father; Horus as son; Hathor, in this instance, as mother), Osiris is suggested.

Amulets of Hathor continued to be used during the Dynastic period, and votive figurines of Hathor were placed in women's graves (Baines 1991, 180; Pinch 1993, 225), offered in shrines and temples and used in houses (Pinch 1993, 199–225). Her crown comprised a sun disk enclosed by usually outwardly curving cow's horns.

Hathor, however, never had bird attributes, despite being the mother of falcon-headed Horus. Even prior to unification, Hathor was envisioned with human face and cow's ears. Images at the top of the Narmer palette provide the best example of her early royal form.¹⁵ During the Dynastic period, she was most often depicted anthropomorphically, with cow's ears. In some examples she was shown completely in animal form, as a cow, but never with any bird-like attributes, despite her position as a sky goddess, 'mistress of the sky, queen of the stars, ruler over Sirius, the great, who makes *H'pj* (the Nile) come' (Bleeker 1973, 27).

As ruler over Sopdet (Sirius) and impetus for the Nile, Hathor assumes Isis's role as rejuvenator of Osiris, god of the Underworld and of the inundation. This places her in the context of mortuary beliefs, where, as a mortuary goddess, she has an intimate relationship with the deceased:

As for his (sic) fate after death, the Egyptian also placed his hope on Hathor. She who granted abundant life on earth was also expected to take care of the departed. The Coffin Texts say of the deceased: 'Hathor has anointed him, she will give him life in the West (realm of the dead), like Re, daily.' (Bleeker 1973, 42)

If it were not for the bird heads, the symbolism and context of this group of figurines with raised arms suggest Hathor so strongly that it is tempting to end the investigation at this point. The figures on the decorated ware are more promising as Hathor, since they have round rather than bird-shaped heads, perhaps explaining why Griffiths did not include the figurines in his discussion of Hathor and the decorated ware. The bird symbolism contradicts Hathor's Dynastic characterization, making it necessary to probe a little more deeply into the character of various Dynastic goddesses for clues to the meanings of the combined association of bird heads and cattle.

Bat

The cow and ox dances of the Nuer and Dinka provide tangible evidence that the raised arms of the figurines and the illustrated figures on the decorated ware mimic the upward reaching horns of cattle. For this reason, as previously explored, Hathor comes to mind most readily. Since the 4th Dynasty (Fischer 1962, 12), her classic crown comprised the sun placed between two graceful, upwardly curving bovine horns, and it could be that the round heads of the figurines on the decorated ware represent the sun. Hathor's horns, however, curve outward—a minor point perhaps, but a significant one when seen in the context of the crown of another cow-goddess, in which the ends of the horns curl inward.

Bat, the cow-goddess of the Upper Egyptian nome 7, is presumed to be older than Hathor (Fischer 1962, 7), and occupied the nome adjacent to Hathor's main home, Dendera. Hathor eventually eclipsed Bat everywhere, except in Bat's home nome, by absorbing her identity. For contemporary Egyptologists, Hathor's appropriation of Bat creates the impression that the emblem of a human head with cow's ears crowned by two inwardly curling horns is an emblem of Hathor as well.

According to Fischer, Bat is represented during the Predynastic by the Gerzeh palette, on which is carved in bas-relief a cow's head pointed out by five stars (Fischer 1962:11), positioned at the tips of each horn and ear, and one on top of the centre of the head, suggesting a stellar constellation. This image is usually considered to be an early representation of Hathor. A similar image can be found on a First Dynasty diorite vessel from Hierakonpolis.¹⁶ This latter image, however is accompanied by a relief carving of a jabiru stork, the phonetic name of which is *Ba*, as in ba-bird. Since the name Bat (*Ba.t*) is the feminine form of the word *Ba* (Fischer 1962, 7), Fischer believed that the stork signifies that the goddess image is of Bat rather than Hathor.

A number of related symbolic meanings conflate when imagining Bat to be the goddess represented in the Predynastic figures with raised arms. The most obvious comparison is the inward curve of the tips of the horns and the deliberate inward curve of the fingers of the figurines and decorated ware images. The cow-headed amulets display the same inward but downward curve of the horns.¹⁷ As far back as the Nagada I record, the cross-lined ware clearly indicates an inward curve to the hands. The horns on the Narmer Palette 'Hathor' heads turn inward as well, and Fisher's observations on Bat prompted even Hornung to speculate whether these heads are of Bat rather than Hathor (Hornung 1983, 103). This led to a wider acceptance of Bat as the cow goddess depicted on the famous palette (Lesko 1999, 17–18, 23).

The second symbol that favours Bat above Hathor is implied by her name. To the Dynastic Egyptians, the *Ba* meant the personal 'soul'. The *Ka* signifies the more impersonal life-producing element present in all living things (Gordon 1996, 31), although it also means the personality (Gardiner 1957, 172–173) and human 'life force' (Allen 2010, 82). The *Ka* leaves the body after death to reside in the Underworld. The *Ba* survives death and leaves the body, but only during the day. At night it must return to the tomb, where it receives the sustenance necessary to maintain its existence. The *Ka* inhabits a representative statue of the deceased and also requires nourishment, ideally perpetually provided by the offerings of the living. In their need for nourishment and their individual survival after death, the *Ka* and *Ba* appear related, in contrast to the *akh*, the spirit, which also survives the death of the body, but

goes to the stars and is free from earthly ties. These three separate aspects of the soul share some traits, but only the *Ba* has an earthly form—either a human-headed bird that flies in and out of the tomb at will, or a stork-like bird (Gardiner 1957, 173).

In the raised arms and the bird-like heads of the figurines, the combination of the *Ka* and *Ba* are brought together. With the symbolic confluence of two concepts of soul in association with the spiritual essence of cattle, Bat becomes a more plausible candidate than Hathor for the identity of this component of the figurine collection.

Although Hathor eventually absorbed Bat, during the Predynastic period they appear to have been distinct deities, each with her own community of worshippers and each with her own spiritual sphere of influence. Hathor came to be associated with royal power, while Bat retired to her own home territory, falling into obscurity outside her nome. Hathor's name, House of Horus, and her hieroglyph, incorporating a falcon enclosed in a building, demonstrate her relationship with the falcon god, who came to be the emblematic deity of rulership. Unlike Bat, she does not combine the bird and cow imagery in her iconography in a way that alludes to eschatological concepts implied by the figurines and painted figures. But before reaching a conclusion on Hathor or Bat, this discussion explores the funerary nature of other deities in order to reveal more complex possibilities, as proposed in the final conclusion.

Isis and Nephthys

Funerary goddesses

Unlike Hathor and Nut, Isis and Nephthys manifest in bird form. Both are kites—hawk-like predatory birds from the falconidae family, with a high pitched keening cry. The kite, rather than a water bird, such as Bat's Jabiru stork, or a seed eater, is implied by the sharp hooked beak of the bird-headed figurines.

Together, Isis and Nephthys perform the official mourning at the king's death, and appear in the *Pyramid Texts* as the mourning birds, the wail of the kite evoking a cry of grief:

The screecher has come, the kite has come: it is Isis and Nephthys. They have come in search of their brother Osiris, in search of their brother, this Pepi.

Haste, haste! Weep for your brother, Isis! Weep for your brother, Nephthys! Weep for your brother! (*Pyr.* P 14)

As kites, both Isis and Nephthys mourn Osiris's death, taking their positions before and behind the coffin (Bleeker 1963a, 191). With their wings, they shade

Osiris as the king from the searing sun; they fan a cool breeze to resuscitate him; (Bleeker 1963a, 193) and they bring about his resurrection, rather than passively mourn (Bleeker 1963a, 219):

Your libation has been libated by Isis [and Nephthys has cleaned you]—your [two] elder and great [sisters] who have collected your flesh, raised your limbs, and made your eyes appear in your head; the Nightboat and Dayboat. (*Pyr.* PII 670)

Surprisingly, Egyptologists have not connected the figurines with the mourning birds of Isis and Nephthys, despite their presence in graves.

Isis, wife of Osiris

As a funerary goddess and wife of Osiris, Isis is often depicted with wings. In some examples, these wings protect the child Horus; at other times, they embrace the coffin of the deceased in a protective gesture, as on Tutankhamen's coffin. Isis is frequently shown as a bird hovering over Osiris's phallus in the embalming chamber. This union of the living Isis and the dead Osiris produces Horus, the new divinity on earth, the god-king (*Pyr.* T 198). As the dead king, Osiris conveys his earthly power to Horus through the intervention of Isis, as a bird, in the process of death. The king is the soul and life of Egypt, and Isis turns death into life by giving birth to Horus, the king on the throne.

As the active but dutiful wife, Isis makes it possible for Osiris to exert his power as king of the Underworld, where he retires as the judge of the dead and symbol of the immortal soul. Through the mediating role of Isis, deceased kings go to Osiris; they become Osiris and rule the Underworld in death as they ruled the world in life. When official religion recognised the same after-life fate for commoners as for royalty, women became Hathor (Bleeker 1973, 45), while men became Osiris. Prior to that, in the minds of the élite at least, only the king enjoyed such a relationship with the ruler of the dead.

For Osiris, Isis serves as the animating principle. Without her, he has no power, and new life (Horus) cannot be born into the world. As the constellation Orion (*Pyr.* P 38), Osiris appears before Isis in the seasonal movement of stars across the sky (Faulkner 1966, 157; Neugebauer and Parker 1969, 112–115). While his appearance signifies imminent new life in the coming of the inundation, the Nile cannot return until Sopdet (Sirius, Greek Sothis), as a manifestation of Isis, sometimes in cow form (Hornung 1983, 80), appears in the sky.¹⁸ While Osiris symbolises the life-bringing principle of the Nile water, Isis symbolises the power that enables Osiris to bring the Nile to life. Once the Nile inundation begins, new life is possible, but only through the co-operation of Isis and Osiris.

Proto-Isis

The spirit of Isis is recognisable in those figurines that raise their arms and bend in a way suggesting hovering. In her bird form, Isis hovers over the body as a hawk hovers over the land, her feet turned up like the balancing tail of the hovering bird. In just this position, she hovers over Osiris's body, impregnating herself.

The arms of the figurines sweep up and behind, wing-like, over the head. The Predynastic Egyptians could have easily recognised the visual similarity between the upward curve of cattle horns and the upward thrust of a bird's wings, inspiring them to detail carefully the fingers of some figurines to resemble feathers (Figure 1c).

The bird-headed Khizam figurines, in particular, bring Isis's role to mind. With upturned feet and upswept arms, they hover like a bird, like Isis over Osiris, their pregnant stomachs representing the new life that comes after death. Like Isis, they take from the deceased the germ of life, bringing about its new birth as a *Kz* in the afterlife, suggesting an Isis prototype in Predynastic mortuary beliefs.

Isis is best known for her roles as throne goddess and mother of the god Horus, the king on the throne. These attributes are relevant to the Dynastic period, but not to Predynastic village culture, with no centralised hierarchy. Also, as demonstrated above, the figurines in question were found in unremarkable graves unlikely to have belonged to powerful members of a ruling class. That the royal Dynastic Isis may have drawn on Predynastic prototypes is suggested instead by the nature of the Dynastic myths that characterise her as a popular, approachable goddess, accessible to ordinary people. A brief examination of some of the Dynastic myths surrounding Isis demonstrates that, despite being a throne goddess, she has a 'common touch'; in fact, her myths speak more directly to the ordinary person than to the ruling class she ostensibly served.

Dynastic Isis, the saviour and protector of commoners

Much of the mythology surrounding Isis places her foremost as a popular deity of the common people. Although her primary official role was to legitimate the inheritance of power on the throne, her widespread appeal as a goddess for all people suggests she was not an invention of the early priesthood.

Isis was renowned for healing snake and scorpion bites, both lethal menaces to the farmers and fishers who spent long hours amongst the dangerous marshes. The aristocracy would be far removed from such labours. As a mother of a young child, she appeals to all mothers, setting an example by curing her own son of bites, scalds, burns and other afflictions, often suffered by those

most exposed to such dangers. As a devoted mother and wife, who protects and saves her husband and son from misfortune and death, she appeals to every mother and wife in the state, not just to the aristocracy.¹⁹

According to C.J. Bleeker, a saviour is one who bridges the cleft between the human and remote divine worlds (Bleeker 1963b, 2). Through a personal connection with humanity, the saviour exhibits human feelings and consoles humanity in its suffering, and at the same time, offers victory over death. At times the saviour even takes part in human suffering. Bleeker thought that Isis conforms so well to this definition, that, although the Egyptians did not ‘officially’ think of her in these terms (Bleeker 1963b, 1), her actions connect her to the suffering of humanity rather than to the aloofness of the other gods, such as Ptah, Amun, Re and Thoth, with their more abstract, impersonal concerns.

Isis is the most influential deity to petition for assistance, protection and consolation. She has such power over the higher gods that she can threaten the life and well-being of even the supreme god, Re. By manipulating Re into being bitten by a snake, she extracts his name by promising in turn to cure him of the fatal bite. As the only deity to know Re’s real name, Isis has control over him, implying that she is even more powerful than he. Having such power over the highest authority, Isis can be petitioned in all evil, misfortune and life-threatening situations, since ‘it was assumed that Isis knew every spell which could avert danger and make life prevail over death’ (Bleeker 1963b, 5).

Perhaps Isis’s most revealing association with commoners occurs when she outwits Seth in his appropriation of Horus’s right to the throne. Disguising herself as an old woman, she pleads with Seth for the rights of her son in a dispute over the herd of cattle inherited from his father. Seth rules in favour of the son’s right to his inheritance, not realizing that the issue is a metaphor for the right of Horus to rule his people. Apparently the word Isis uses for ‘cattle’ also means ‘people’.

The story employs a metaphor that is pertinent not only to the lives of ancient Egyptian royalty. Rather, this issue is still appropriate in today’s cattle-herding Nilotic societies. A young man’s position in the Nuer world is based on the size of the herd of cattle inherited from his father. Without a cattle herd, a young man cannot marry, since he does not possess sufficient cattle to offer as a bride-price. Families with marriageable daughters try to confine their daughters’ relationships to young men with an adequate inheritance, making it difficult for disinherited boys to attract wives and attain position (Evans-Pritchard 1951, 53).

During the Predynastic period, cattle were vital to the well-being of individual families and tribes. The distinct possibility that Predynastic people performed the ox and cow dances demonstrates the spiritual and material

importance of cattle, and any challenge to an inheritance of cattle would create a major crisis. In the agricultural communities of Dynastic Egypt, cattle herds would have still been an important indication of wealth and position.

The dispute about Horus's inherited power over his people (cattle) has the mark of a story even older than the beginning of the institution of kingship. In the same way, many of the stories about Isis suggest the prior existence of Predynastic myths about the powers of protective goddess(es); their mediation between the remote sky gods and humanity; and their use of divine powers (magic) to ameliorate the inevitable misfortunes of a life subject to unexplained illnesses, fatal scorpion and snake bites and the life-threatening dangers of pregnancy and childbirth.

The rulers and priests of Egypt did not provide Isis with a main temple and accompanying official cult. This seems odd treatment for a goddess intimately associated with kingship and divine power. Rather, chapels dedicated to her accompanied major temples, for example at the Temple of Sety I at Abydos and the temple of Augustus at Dendera (Hart 1986, 106). Not until the end of Egyptian rule was a great temple built for her (in the Delta by Nectanebo II, 360-343 BCE) at Philae, perhaps replacing a seventh century BCE construction at this site that may have been a sanctuary dedicated to Isis (Rutherford 1998, 231; Weigall 1907, 49). This latter would still, however, be a late and minor dedication for such a prominent goddess. Despite her role as throne goddess, her real patronage seems to have come from ordinary Egyptians, who sought her help in these various places of worship throughout the country, including Philae, where a large corpus of dedications from commoners was addressed to her (Griffith 1935-1937). Unlike other major deities, she was not served by a retinue of priests and officials in her own temple; like the Predynastic figurines, her ministrations favoured the ordinary people rather than the rich and powerful. Although her iconography establishes her as the personification of the throne, hymns dedicated to her make no mention of this role and instead focus on her abilities to heal and overcome obstacles (Quirke 1992, 67).

Hathor's appeal is quite different. Her association with royalty and the official cult eventually led to the institutionalization of her marriage with Horus, accompanied by a major annual festival performance of the marriage after her public and ceremonious journey from her temple at Dendera to the Horus temple at Edfu (Bleeker 1973, 63). Conversely, Isis's marriage to Osiris has a tragic feel, with its emphasis on the more serious subjects of death and resurrection. Also, although Hathor may share some traits with Isis, such as protecting pregnant women and childbirth, Hathor is more interested in the fun of life than its problems. Despite her wrathful alter ego, Sekhmet, she is the

goddess of love, intoxication and music and the bringer of happiness (Bleeker 1973, 104–105; Watterson 1984, 133). One cannot imagine Isis, as saviour, protector and royal mother, lifting up her skirts to expose herself for the amusement of Re, as Hathor did (Bleeker 1973, 39). Rather, when she does lift up her skirts, she intends to stimulate maternal fertility and marital happiness (Frankfurter 1998, 104), not to amuse an ageing, cranky god. Like Sumer's Inanna, Hathor is the divine 'good-time girl', perhaps prone to bad temper and pique, while Isis, like Ninhursaga, performs the more sober and responsible roles of divine mother and protector.

Isis's nature takes her beyond the historical confines of the Dynastic royal house and into the wider world of the Predynastic agricultural community. Here, as an agent of salvation from death and from life's misfortunes, the popularity of a proto-Isis could conceivably have spread over a large portion Predynastic world. Her ability to inspire loyalty and trust would eventually ensure her a powerful position within the divine hierarchy of the aristocracy, who chose their ruling deities very astutely for many reasons, including securing support from the wider community.

Which Goddess Might They Be?

Of the Dynastic deities, Isis possesses the greatest number of qualities that can be assigned with confidence to the symbolically rich Predynastic figurines. She is occasionally associated with a cow when she adopts Hathor's crown and as Sopdet in cow form. As well, the implications for equating the vitality of the *Ka* with the vitality of cattle, and the suggestion of the *Ka* in the raised arms comply with Isis's role as instigator of fecundity, both in the Underworld and the agricultural world. The hawk symbolism, the hovering body form and the implications of pregnancy in the afterlife bring this group of figurines in line with Isis's role in the revivification of the deceased.

Besides Isis, Hathor and Bat remain candidates, despite the more limited symbolic similarities. It may, however, not be necessary to rule out any of them completely. Keeping in mind the Egyptian tendency to conflate or syncretise deities, for example, the absorption of Bat by Hathor very early in Egyptian history, Hathor's tendency to share Isis's roles and attributes may not be only a Dynastic phenomenon. Hathor and Isis share many qualities and responsibilities regarding Horus, the afterlife and the Nile. Isis and Hathor later become nearly identical. As Fischer suggests for Bat and Hathor, 'a common substratum of ideas...lent the two goddesses a somewhat similar character' (Fischer 1962, 12).

Isis and Hathor could also stem from 'a common substratum of ideas' pre-dating their royal identities. Hathor and Isis may have emerged from a single

Predynastic goddess of fecundity and rejuvenation. With the evolution of the state and the need for a legitimating spiritual power, Isis may have conceivably split off from an original deity that combined the powers of both goddesses. To her former position in the mythology surrounding death and rebirth, would be added new responsibilities relevant to the new statehood, and a new name, pertinent to her new position, would be assigned—*ast*—meaning ‘seat’ or ‘throne’. Instead of a pair of raised horns, her crown became a throne. Meanwhile, Hathor/Bat retained the horned crown and the cow insignia, and Hathor unofficially retained her previous reputation as mother of Horus, mistress of the stars, protector of the dead, stimulator of the Nile, and ruler over Sirius—all positions more readily understood to belong to Isis.

Perhaps a single deity comprising all these qualities existed under the feminine name of the *Ka*. Like *Ba.t* (Bat), such a goddess may have been called *Ka.t*. That the headdresses of various goddesses formed cow horns, symbolic of the raised arm motif of the *Ka*, lends some plausibility to Budge’s suggestion that *Ka-t* (cow) is the feminine form of *Ka* (bull), and the plural would be ‘the two cows Isis and Nephthys’ (Budge 1978 [1920], 785). In the B.M. PAP. 10188, ‘The Lament of Isis’, Isis and Nephthys are called ‘the two cows’, mothers of the divine bull as Osiris (Dennis 2003 [1910], 31). The cow, bull, *Ka* and *Ba* unite several Dynastic goddesses into one essential spiritual unity, and this unity is expressed by the combination of symbols displayed by the figurines principally from Khizam and Ma’ameriah. As the feminine form of the *Ka* (meaning both bull and vital essence), the Predynastic figurines with raised arms, including those without beaked faces, can be interpreted as Isis and Nephthys as two cow goddesses, along with Nut, Hathor and Bat, their arms over their heads expressing their link with the divine essence of cattle. The beaked forms more closely suggest Isis and Nephthys as the mourning birds, rescuing and resuscitating the dead, effecting their rebirth as *Ka(s)* and *Ba(s)*.

On the other hand, the shared aspects of Nut, Bat, Isis, Nephthys and Hathor may represent overlapping attributes of several Predynastic goddesses who were coalesced into a few clearly differentiated goddesses by the scribes and priests of the early Dynastic period. These early officials were skilled at categorisation and classification, as demonstrated by their ordering of a chaotic mixture of deities and creation myths into logical, or at least comprehensible, systems. Although they still ended up with two divine lineages—the Ogdoad and the Ennead—three major creation myths and three major supreme deities, the pantheon is manageable considering the possible number of separate religious systems released from a collection of disparate communities into a unified culture. The distinctly separate goddesses of Nut, Isis, Hathor and Bat could be the result of official rationalization of the spirit world

and an attempt to re-assign independent responsibilities to various Predynastic goddesses who shared common attributes.²⁰

Conclusion

The Predynastic figurines with raised arms, both male and female, bring together the spiritual power of cattle, central to both Predynastic Egyptian and Nilotic culture in general, with the Dynastic concepts of the *Ka* and *Ba*. Those with beaked faces combine these ideas with the spiritual implications of birds as mediators between the afterlife and the grave. These ideas in the context of a belief in the afterlife suggest that the Predynastic Egyptians, like the Dynastic Egyptians, believed in a spiritual force that survived death and entered a new life in the Underworld.

The examination of the figurines in the context of Nile village culture, both contemporary and Predynastic, leads me to conclude that these specific figurines, and perhaps others, can be placed within an eschatology ancestral to that of the Dynastic king, in which Isis and Nephthys mediate between the king as Osiris and immortality in the afterlife. No doubt the names of these Predynastic spiritual entities would have been different, possibly sharing the combined identity or a ‘common substratum of ideas’ among Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, Nut and Bat, as suggested by the many features of these goddesses that overlap in the historic period. But the distinctive features chosen for the goddess Isis, and to a lesser extent her sister, Nephthys, as the two kites and the two cows, are best expressed by the bird-like figurines with raised arms, especially the hovering, ‘pregnant’ ones, who may, like Isis, have hovered over the deceased, engendering a new life as a *Ka* after the death of the body.

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Notes

1. Four female figurines found in a box in grave 2682 at Matmar and registered in Brunton's excavation catalogue (Brunton 1948, Table IX); a few from Elise Baumgartel's supplement to Petrie's work at Nagada (Baumgartel 1970a); Joan Crowfoot Payne's appendix to the supplement (Payne 1990); Henry de Morgan's report on Ma'ameriah (de Morgan 1912); and Winifred Needler's further work on de Morgan's excavations (Needler 1984).
2. Ucko divided his collection of 232 figurines into two categories: stratified (77 figurines) and unstratified (155 figurines). The stratified figurines are documented to have come from specific graves, while the unstratified are preserved in museums and permanent collections without record of provenance other than 'found in a grave'. Including examples found in other sources, the total number of stratified figurines comes to 88.
3. Nagada I period—3900–3650 BCE; Nagada II period—3650–3300 BCE.
4. During the Dynastic period, figurines were used in both graves and households, the most well-known being the ushabti figurines. Figurines of deities were used in ordinary household shrines and as votive offerings in temples. For information, consult, for example Stevens (2006) and Waraksa (2009).
5. 'Contemporary' in this case means the early to mid-twentieth century, when the traditional tribal Sudanese cultures were undisturbed by recent political events.
6. Adapted from Needler (1984, Pl. 62).
7. For illustrations of the Mesopotamian and Halaf figurines, see Parrot (1960); for illustrations of the Yarmukian figurines, see Garfinkel (1999).
8. Adapted from James (1979, 166, Pl. 59).
9. Adapted from Griffiths (1996, 12, Fig. 1).
10. The connection between the raised arm motifs of both Egyptian and Sudanese cultures has recently been discussed briefly by Wilkinson (2003) and Kendall (2004, 125–126).
11. Selected from a group of dancers photographed by Lienhardt, (1961, Pl. 1).
12. References to Spells in the *Pyramid Texts* will be indicated by *Pyr.* X XXX.
13. For a succinct history of Hathor see Lesko (1999, 81–129), and for a more in depth exploration, see Roberts (1997).
14. Contrary to most interpretations, Lesko (1999, 82–85) speculates that Hathor was an invention of the early Dynastic priesthood, as she is rarely mentioned in the *Pyramid Texts*. Early cow imagery, she attributes to Bat (Lesko 1999, 17–18, 23).
15. Contrary to many interpretations, Hornung (1983, 103) suggested the goddess Bat for the Narmer palette, and this identification is accepted by others (Lesko 1999, 17–18, 23).
16. See *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 44 Plate IX.

17. Photographs of these amulets appear in Petrie (1920, Pl. IX, Figs. 4,5) and Baumgartel (1960, Pl. VI, Fig. 2).

18. In the Early Dynastic period, Sopdet is represented in cow form (Hornung 1983, 80).

19. For a succinct summary of the history and myths of Isis, see Anthes (1961, 68-85), Lesko (1999, 155-202) and Watterson (1984, 89-131), and for a more detailed discussion, see Witt (1971). The 7 volumes of *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leitz 2002-2003) provide detailed primary source material on each Egyptian deity.

20. Syncretisation of deities is not unique to Egypt and can be found in most ancient and contemporary religions. For example, the Chinese syncretised the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avelokiteshevara, with their indigenous Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin, to form the uniquely Chinese version of this Bodhisattva in female, rather than the traditional male, form. The Christian image of Mary with the infant Jesus is modelled after the image of Isis nursing Horus. The similarities between the Nuer high god, *Kwoth Nhial* and the Dinka high god, *nhialic aciek*, suggest a 'common substratum of ideas' in these Sudanese religions. Innumerable examples can be identified and these are just three of perhaps thousands which indicate a common phenomenon in the history and formation of religions.